

Gender relations and organic farming: a comparative analysis of Hungary and Italy

Institutional support has been growing recently for lower-input farming initiatives as part of a general effort to promote a conversion to sustainable agriculture. Such incentives have coupled with rises in consumer demand such that organic farming has become a major source of economic growth in rural areas, especially in member states of the European Union (EU) and in Central and Eastern European countries applying for EU accession (Láng and Csete, 1995; Wynen, 1998). As organic farming has spread, there has been a rising interest in understanding how different social groups are affected by the conversion from conventional to organic farming (Ilbery, 1998). A direct contribution to these recent concerns, this study aims to identify and explain how the adoption of organic farming in different geographical contexts affects women and men differently.

The proposed project is grounded in studies on gender and agriculture and on the geographical dimensions of gender. These approaches have seldom been combined to explain gender-based inequality in agriculture through a comparative geographical lens. Research on gender and farming has contributed to the explanation of gender-based differentiation in farming with respect to livelihood strategies, resource control and access, and divisions of labor in both the home and workplace (Sachs, 1996). Geographical research has shown that gender-based disparities take different forms in different places as a result of divergent historical trajectories (Jones et al., 1997). In Hungary, for instance, rural women have often been involved in mechanized production, which in Italy has been dominated by men (Paloscia, 1991; Répássy, 1991). Gender relations in Hungary may therefore mean a greater occurrence of skilled women workers in farming compared to Italy.

With respect to organic farming, a controversy has developed over the nature of labor relations upon farm conversion. Some claim that organic farming leads to greater gender equality because of its orientation toward femininity-associated tasks (Peter et al., 2000). Others express skepticism because of prevailing gender inequalities in other farming sectors (Hall, 1998). Yet these theories may be premature, as current data are insufficient (Jansen, 2000: 261). Moreover, pre-existing and currently changing gender relations may have a determining effect on organic farming practices, depending on place. Organic methods have been correlated with greater reliance on family labor so that gender-based divisions of labor, availability of employment, and access to know-how become salient factors of social differentiation. In Hungary, the result of higher family labor input may strain farm productivity as a consequence of women's double burden in subsistence and commercial activities (Engel-Di Mauro, 2002). In Italy, however, the shortage of women employed in agriculture may lead to a greater reliance on immigrant labor and informal employment, both male and female (Tommasi, 1997). A comparative study will offer ways to deduce the main factors that facilitate or reduce gender differentiation in organic farming. At the same time, differences in the local responses to organic farming will illuminate the importance of geography in farm conversion outcomes.

Hungary and Italy provide ideal contexts for this study because of analytically useful similarities and differences. Both countries conform to EU organic standards and inspection regulations and have a long tradition of small-scale farming, which may facilitate conversion to organic methods. For both countries, organic farming has been growing in economic importance due to EU incentives but in a context of relatively less competitive agriculture compared to other Central and Western European countries. For Hungary, a prospective EU member, this development has been aided by EU funds, such as the PHARE program, and it may contribute to EU accession and/or to the penetration of niche markets (Varga, 1998). Similarly, greater investment in organic farming qualifies Italian regions for additional EU subsidies through Regulation 2078/92 and may spur economic recovery in rural areas (Compagnoni et al., 2001).

On the other hand, Italy exemplifies the direct effects of EU policies on organic farming and of recurring farm subsidies through the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU and the national government. In contrast, Hungary has experienced a strong influence of centralized planning, the integration of large- and small-scale farms (especially during the 1980s), and the unfolding of marketisation before and during the current EU accession process (Kováč, 1999). Hungarian agriculture has shown a gradual increase in smaller farms, whereas in Italy reforms and privatization have led to the opposite tendency (Mottura and Mingione, 1991). These are some of the salient differences in the agricultural histories of the two countries. A comparative study will bring to relief the gendered aspects of these differences in the development and diffusion of organic farming.

The project is based on the extended case method, in which case studies are identified and used to modify existing theory (Hamel et al., 1993). The case studies from Italy and Hungary will provide evidence for or against the theory that gender equality is increased through the introduction of organic farming. The degree of gender equality will be determined by such criteria as the degree of sharing in decision-making and housework, evenness in revenue distribution, and equality of control of access to agricultural resources (e.g., land, inputs). Data will be gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews and archival research in Budapest, in SW and SE Hungary, as well as in Tuscany, Piedmont, and Rome, Italy. Following fieldwork, the data will be processed at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The duration of the research will be five months (20 weeks), spread over the summers of 2003 and 2004.

Aside from two known organic farms in SW Hungary, family farms and larger farming units will be contacted through the University of Gödöllő, the Centre for Regional Studies (Békéscsaba, Budapest, and Pécs), the Institute for Geographical Research (Budapest), and the Hungarian Sociological Association (Budapest). In Italy, farmers will be contacted via the Coordinamento Toscano Produttori Biologici (Firenze), the Agronomic Institute for the Overseas of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Firenze), and faculty at the University of Turin. During the first two months of research, a questionnaire will be piloted among several families and managers while archival data and other documentation will be gathered. The principal investigator will collect gender-sensitive data from several organic farms comprised of both family farms and larger enterprises. Farmers and farm workers will be interviewed individually about land tenure and access, soil quality, cropping system, reasons for becoming involved in organic farming, agricultural experience, educational level, institutional constraints, daily work routine, off-farm work, reliance on conventional inputs, labor conditions, crops produced, animals raised, the hiring process, machinery use, and decision-making processes.

The interview results will be compared to data from statistical offices and documentary collections from the above-mentioned institutions in both countries. For Europe-wide comparisons, research documents and databases on organic farming and gender will be consulted at the "Women in Development" Office of the Sustainable Development Group at the FAO's Regional Office for Europe (Rome). These data will be analyzed for historical changes in income level differences, land ownership, employment differences, work segregation, number and size of organic farms, trade in organic produce, subsidy amounts, and total organic farming output.

Based on the results, further funding will be sought from other granting institutions to build and use a wider quantitative survey suitable for multivariate statistical analysis. Different factors involved in the conversion to organic farming and in organic farming practices per se will be tested against an index of relative internal household/family equality to determine which factors, if any, facilitate or hinder the development of greater gender equality, such as the degree of revenue sharing and the distribution of housework. The findings will eventually serve as the springboard for investigating how EU expansion is affecting agricultural practices and associated gender relations in both member and accession-seeking countries.

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